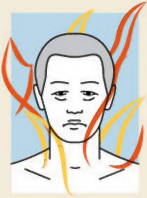# The Name Blame Game

In February 2020 the World Health Organization selected Covid-19 *as the official name of the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. "It's easy to politicize," said the WHO's director general in reference to terms such as* Wuhan flu *and* Chinese virus. *"It's harder to tackle a problem together."*

INFLUENZA

An Italian word originally used to describe any epidemic disease, the modern sense appeared in the seventeenth century and came into English use following a 1743 flu outbreak that spread to England from Italy.

Russian flu | EUROPE, 1889
A virulent strain of influenza that had been circulating in Russia's interior struck St. Petersburg before erupting into a pandemic popularly referred to as Russian flu. "John Bull," read a notice that year in a Christmas issue of a London satirical magazine, "has caught the influenza from the Russian bear and does not thank him for the gift."

Spanish flu | GLOBAL, 1918–19
Although the influenza pandemic originated on a Kansas army base before spreading to Europe, it became associated with Spain because Madrid newspapers, not being subject to wartime censorship, were able to publish the most detailed reporting of the emerging crisis.

YELLOW FEVER

Probably introduced from West Africa to the New World via slave ships, yellow fever is a viral infection transmitted by mosquitoes. The name refers to the liver–failure–induced jaundice that occurs in about 15 percent of cases.

Barbados distemper | COLONIAL AMERICA, c. 1640
Yellow fever caused so many deaths on Barbados plantations that British colonialists referred to it by the island's name for decades, regardless of the location of outbreaks.

Palatine fever | PHILADELPHIA, 1793
During one severe outbreak, a disproportionately high mortality rate among new immigrants arriving from Germany's Palatinate region led to the coining of this term.

TYPHUS

Transmitted to humans by lice, fleas, mites, and ticks, typhus thrives in crowded places with poor sanitary conditions, leading to it frequently being called camp fever, jail fever, or war fever.

Hungarian fever | AUSTRIA, 1542
Typhus outbreaks in military camps during Holy Roman Emperor Charles V's incursions into Ottoman territory killed thirty thousand of his troops in 1542, leading to the proverb "Hungary is the grave of the Germans," still in common use three centuries later.

Irish fever | ENGLAND, c. 1850
The Irish potato famine forced millions of people into workhouses, where overcrowding and lack of sanitation created ideal conditions for the spread of typhus. Those who immigrated to England were accused of carrying the disease with them.

RUBELLA

The name of this highly communicable virus comes from the Latin word *ruber* (red), a reference to the characteristic rash that appears on sufferers' bodies.

STAMP OUT RUBELLA*
BE SURE YOUR CHILD IS IMMUNIZED
(*GERMAN MEASLES)
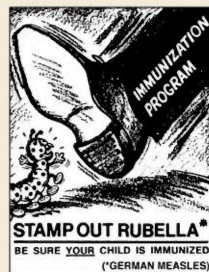
German measles | EUROPE, c. 1790
In use since the late eighteenth century, rubella's most common nickname stems from the nationality of Friedrich Hoffmann, the physician who first described the disease in 1740.

Liberty measles | UNITED STATES, 1917
Anti-German sentiment during World War I led some Americans to rechristen the disease. One Baltimore pharmacist noted skeptically of the name change, "One would fancy that an ex-victim of the 'German' measles would fight the Teutons harder."

In 1495 a new venereal disease afflicted French-occupied Naples and soon spread across Eurasia, mostly along trade routes. Until 1530, when poet Girolamo Fracastoro dubbed it syphilis, the disease was known by over a dozen names, based on whoever was presumed to have introduced it. Though debate continues over the disease's geographic origin, evidence suggests it was brought back from the New World by returning conquistadors.

SPANISH DISEASE — Spain
GERMAN DISEASE — Germany
POLISH DISEASE
Poland
Russia
SPANISH DISEASE — FRENCH DISEASE
England
FRENCH DISEASE
Italy
GUANGDONG SORES
China
CHINESE ULCER
Japan
SPANISH DISEASE
Portugal
NEAPOLITAN DISEASE
France
CHRISTIAN DISEASE
Turkey
PORTUGUESE DISEASE
Sri Lanka
EUROPEAN DISEASE
Persia

ENGLISH SWEATING SICKNESS
This highly fatal disease, perhaps a type of hantavirus, first emerged in England in 1485. The name stuck for subsequent outbreaks in France and Germany.

LYME DISEASE
Eighteenth-century medical texts suggest that the tick-borne illness, named after a Connecticut town where a cluster of cases was observed in 1975, might have originated in Scotland.

EBOLA VIRUS
Epidemiologists who identified the pathogen in 1976 considered naming it Yambuku virus, after the village where it emerged. Fearing backlash against the villagers, however, they instead named it after a nearby river.

SIBERIAN PLAGUE
Anthrax, a bacterial infection that affects humans and livestock, has been closely associated with Siberia both within and outside Russia since the eighteenth century.

NORTHERN BARBARIAN POX
According to a Chinese medical text written around 340, smallpox first arrived in China by way of soldiers returning from war with the Huns in the first century BC.

PERSIAN FIRE
Of unknown cause, this skin ailment was described by Galen in the second century and Avicenna in the eleventh.

WEST NILE VIRUS
Named in 1937 for the region of Uganda where it was first discovered, the mosquito-transmitted virus spread to Europe in the mid-1990s by way of migrating birds.

Connecticut
England
Siberia
China
Persia
Ebola River
Uganda

Map by Haisam Hussein